

The Key to My Neighbor's House

SEEKING
JUSTICE IN
BOSNIA AND
RWANDA

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PROLOGUE

Let me begin as it began for me: glimpsing evil in a man's soul.

The man I've been expecting has just swaggered up to my table in this smoke-filled café, followed by one of his henchmen and the aroma of cheap cologne. Like any city tough, his hands are jammed into his pants pockets and his muscular shoulders strain at the seams of his cheap black leather jacket. But when he looks at me, his eyes are as empty of expression as pure glass.

He pulls up a chair, summons the waitress, and sends her scurrying to get brandy, beer, more coffee, with the arrogance of a Mafia don. He sits down on my right, blond and mustachioed, and cocks his eyebrow. The war-hardened soldiers slouching at nearby tables, their cigarettes drooping from their lips, nod with approval. They believe this man, a fellow soldier, to be a hero. But I've been searching for him for six weeks because I believe him to be something else: executioner.

I am in the Bosnian-Serb half of Bosnia and Herzegovina and it is 1996. Peace is so newly minted here in the city of Bijeljina that civilians still don't venture onto the streets. Only a mere seven months have passed since this man and others in the Bosnian Serb 10th Sabotage Unit rounded up 1,200 unarmed Bosnian Muslim men and led them to an abandoned, grassy meadow at a collective farm just down the highway from here. They ordered the men to turn their backs and kneel on the ground. Then, as their captives wept and pleaded for their lives, they shot them.

At the time, I'd been reporting from Bosnia for more than two years, and I still couldn't understand what turned neighbors of long standing into killers, rapists, torturers: whether it was ideology or hate or madness or history or blood lust that made civilization's constraints vanish.

I had wanted to talk to this man's commander, General Radislav

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rarely granted a visa. So I had set out tracking down this young soldier instead, whose name I had gotten from Bosnian Muslim war crimes investigators. I've spent nights searching for him in drafty bars filled with grimacing thugs and pounding rock music, and days hunting him down, the car jogging along like a child's pogo stick on roads pitted by shelling and years of communist neglect. I've come too far now to turn back. Never mind that I am the only woman in the room, save for my translator, Alex, and the waitress; never mind that suddenly the interview karma doesn't seem quite right. Much later I would offer the typical journalistic defense: The interview had been my editor's idea. Because Marko "Macak" Boškić was not in a cooperative mood.

"Do you have a tape recorder? Let's see," Boškić said with a growl, as he rifled through our coat pockets, scattering pieces of old gum, gas receipts, and shredded Kleenex across the table. Discovering my small Sony portable, he debated stealing it, but simply removed one of the batteries and the tape. The waitress, giggling at the cloak-and-dagger preparations, was shooed away with a scowl, and Boškić got down to business.

"Where did you get my name?" he demanded, leaning over the wooden table.

"From Erdemović," I lied, naming a soldier from his unit, Dražen Erdemović, who had recently confessed to the executions to international war crimes prosecutors in The Hague, Netherlands. In truth, Erdemović would later identify Boškić as part of the massacre squad.

"That traitor." Boškić sneered. I took this as an opening.

"Look, I'd like to talk to you about Srebrenica—I want to talk to you about *your* side of the story," I gushed nervously, referring to the massacres, which I had been told he participated in, that followed the fall of the UN safe area of Srebrenica and left thousands of Muslim men and boys dead. "Were you ordered to kill those men? Why did you do it?"

Silence.

The coffee in my cup suddenly tasted like silt. The dreary café began to look as welcoming as one of those graffiti-scarred, inner-city gas stations, where the cashier is encased behind thick, bulletproof glass. There comes a moment in every interview when you realize things are not going as planned; in this case, I'd just realized Boškić was not going to tell me why he had executed those men, after all.